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The Cabinet.

TALKS WITH EXPERTS.

I.—MR. HEROMICH SHUGIO ON JAPANESE SWORDS.



For no other productions of ancient Japanese art are collectors so enamoured as of the wonderful blades, and still more wonderful scabbards, guards and hilt-casings of the Daimio and Samurai, the lords and fighting men of old Japan. In this they but follow the Japanese themselves, though for other reasons. In Japan, the sword was, and, perhaps, still is, the heirloom par excellence, the most precious of family relics, until the late revolution, by law and custom held inalienable. Hence it was an object on which to lavish ornament. No material was too rich, no artist's skill too great to be expended on its decorations. Those mountings of silver and gold, those hammered guards and hilt-coverings of shark-skin and silk cords holding fast "menuki," little reliefs in precious metal, were what first attracted American and European collectors, who only afterward became interested in the fine quality of the blades and in the historical and romantic associations which often attach to them.

This awakening of interest in the very considerations which have led the Japanese to devote to the beautifying of these weapons all the resources of their arts has influenced *The Art Amateur* to bring out and lay before its readers the opinions of Mr. Heromich Shugio, the most competent Japanese connoisseur to be found in this country. A conversation had with him to this end by the writer ran about as follows:

"It is a fact," Mr. Shugio began, in answer to a leading question, "that no branch of art was more honored than that of sword-forging in the eyes of old Japan. A sword was much more than a mere sharp steel blade forged out of iron, it was, as we say, the soul of the Samurai, and the guardian angel of his honor and rank. The highest pride of the Japanese gentleman was in his sword, and he would give almost anything for it."

"Yet," it was objected, "numbers of what must have been highly prized weapons have been sold by their original owners in our time, and there is a story of a Japanese gentleman in Paris who used the sabre of his fathers for cutting the wires of the corks of champagne bottles."

"Very likely," Mr. Shugio retorted. "Our civil war, and the destruction of the feudal system of society accounts for the sale of swords as well as of many other remarkable specimens of our arts which had long been kept as heirlooms in families now impoverished. And as for the young Japanese gentleman in Paris, it is true that we, like other nations, have our contempters of old customs or old prejudices, as they very likely regard them; and he may have been one of these. But perhaps he was also showing off the temper of his weapon, as well as that of his intellect."

"It is said by Mr. Moore that the presence in the curio dealer's hands of numbers of sword-guards without the blades is accounted for by the fact that the French Government, before the outbreak of the Franco-German war, bought quantities of the latter but had no use for the former, which therefore had to be sold separately."

"Mr. Moore is an expert, and it may very well be as he says, but it is not necessary to account for blades and guards being separated. The blade is the essential part, and famous blades were often remounted several times, just as a lady may have her family diamonds reset. Some fine blades by famous makers have never been mounted like this," and Mr. Shugio reached out for a long scabbard of plain wood, from which he drew a blade of the finest steel which had never been set in any handle.

"A peculiarity of our swords," he said, "is the marking which you perceive near the edge of the blade, and which is caused by the edge being tempered differently from the body by being covered with clay when placed in the fire. This peculiar marking is termed *yakiba*."

"Is it by anything connected with this separate tempering of the edge that you distinguish a good sword-blade from an inferior one?"

"In part. The *yakiba* is examined to find if what our experts call the 'niye' and 'niwoi'—shadings, that is, of the quality of soft flesh texture—exist, and if any 'hagire' or flaws are to be found in the edge. Next, the

'nakago,' the part that runs into the handle, is inspected, to make sure that it has the bona fide signature of the maker, and the file-marks, which are different for each province. This part has sometimes been shortened, which in the case of a blade valuable for its antiquity, is, of course, a misfortune."

"But when the blade is mounted, how is it possible to see whether the *nakago* and its signature and file-marks are all right? It would be necessary to take off the handle and remove the guard."

"Exactly. And that it should always be perfectly easy to do," said Mr. Shugio, taking another sword, with its handle and ornaments attached. He took out a little bamboo pin at the base of the handle, after which the casing of wood, with its shark-skin cover, silk cords, and silver and ivory ornaments and pommel, came off all together as easily as the scabbard is removed from the blade. The guard followed, and it was as easy to examine the bared blade in all its parts as if it had never been mounted.

Mr. Shugio pointed out the engraved characters which formed the maker's name, and the file-marks, and then returned the ornamented guard and handle. In answer to a query as to how swords of fine quality were distinguished among themselves, he said that the readiest marks were those afforded by the style of the cloudings near the edge, which will enable a good judge of swords to discriminate between one blade and another much as connoisseurs of porcelains judge of the quality of paste and glaze—by the eye alone. The cutting quality of the sword is judged from the quality of its edge, its general shape as well as the quality of its metal."

"How old are the oldest Japanese swords?"

"It is impossible to say. The oldest blades are not signed with the maker's name. Still, it is certain that it is one of the oldest arts practised in our country. Swordsmiths have always been esteemed gentlemen by profession. The forging was usually accompanied by imposing ceremonials. And after the custom of signing the blades had been introduced, the maker of a blade of the finest temper left an immortal name behind him."

"When and how was that custom introduced?"

"It was decreed by the Emperor Bunbu in the first year of Taiho, corresponding to the year A.D. 701."

"Who is the most celebrated maker of sword-blades?"

"The finest examples of blades bearing makers' signatures are those made by the famous Amakuni of Yamato, who lived about A.D. 700. One of his blades, known as Kogarasu ("little raven"), has been handed down through several families, and has always been regarded as a treasure by its possessors, and was for a long time an heirloom in the Taira family."

"What other famous makers were there?"

"During the reign of the Emperor Heijio, who reigned from 806 to 809 A.D., Shinsoku, a priest of the temple in Usa of Buzen, made blades which are regarded as treasures. In the reign of Saga Tenno (810 to 823), Yasut-suna of Ohara village, in the province of Hoki, forged what are considered the best blades of his time. His son, Sanemori, who lived in the reign of the Emperor Jimmei (834 to 850), was also a famous sword-smith, and one of his blades, known as Nuki-Maru, was equally with the Kogarasu-Maru, already mentioned, prized among the chief treasures of the Taira family. Yasufusa of Mutsu (931 to 946), was a very skilful maker of Shohei and Tenkei, and, during the Tenreki period (947 to 956), Sanenari of Bizen and his two sons, Tomonari and Sukenari, made blades much superior to other makers of the time."

"Were there not in sword-making, as in other arts, families renowned through several generations for skill in their specialty?" "Yes; the family just mentioned is an example. It became one of the two most celebrated sword-making families of the province of Bizen. The other was that of Kanahira, whose most famous descendants were Sukehira and Takahira. Monjiu of Mutsu was considered to be the rival of Yasufusa, during the reign of Yenuyoo (970 to 984). He made two celebrated blades, each about 2 feet 7 inches long, for the celebrated General Minamoto no Mitsunaka, of the Genji family. The general tried them on the dead body of a criminal. He cut off the head with a blow of the first, which cut off the beard from the chin at the same time. Satisfied with that he tried the second on another criminal, which cut off the neck and knees at one stroke. Hence he called the two 'beard-cutter' and 'knee-cutter.'"

"But there were other swords than these?"

"Yes, the Japanese gentleman usually bore about with him two swords, a long sword for his service, and another, shorter one, which was his ordinary means of

defence. Besides these there were swords specially made for use in battle; and, among ceremonial swords, those intended to be worn on New Year's day were finest and most richly ornamented."

"Your acquaintance, Mr. Moore, shows a short sword, of which the blade is of pure gold. The sheath and handle are of wood, and not especially attractive, and his explanation is that the original owner simply regarded it as a convenient way of carrying about the equivalent of a large sum of money in a form which was little likely to tempt the cupidity of robbers."

"Yes, I should think it probable in that particular case. But such toy swords, as we call them, are not uncommon in less precious materials. Usually, the blades are of wood, though the scabbards and handles are often as richly decorated as those of real swords. The existence of these toy swords is due to the desire of rich or well-to-do people, who were not of the nobility or the military class, to appear to belong to these upper ranks. The law prohibited them from carrying real effective swords, but they might carry make-believe swords even of the richest description so long as the essential part, the steel blade, was wanting."

"Might not such toy swords, on account of artistic work put upon their scabbards and handles, be objects worthy of being collected?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Do you know of any such in a collection beside the one belonging to Mr. Moore?"

"There are both in this country and in Japan many fine toy swords, generally short swords, with the most remarkable mountings."

REFERRING to the articles of M. Durand Gréville on American Art Galleries, of which a summary has been given in *The Art Amateur*, M. Henri Garnier says that M. Gréville is mistaken in supposing that the greater or the better part of the work of any French painter of the school of 1830 has found its way to this side of the Atlantic. French amateurs, we are told, are shy of making their acquisitions known to the public, which is only another way of saying that they are entirely devoid of public spirit. Mr. Quincey Shaw may have twenty Millets, but "un tel Amateur de Paris" has "more than" forty Meissoniers; another has a score of Delacroix; a third has two dozen of Decamps, and a fourth has a Daubigny for every day in the month. M. Garnier can cite collections which possess "series" of Corots, batches, we presume, of Rousseaus, shoals of Duprés, and Isabeyes, and Fromentins, and Troyons. And all of these are of the first order, and such as cannot be met with in the most celebrated galleries of the new world. Well, so be it. We may intimate that we never supposed otherwise.

THE collection of M. de Lafaulotte, made twenty-five years ago, and containing a little of everything, but most of it good, was sold in Paris not long ago for much more than it cost, judging from the following: A rectangular plaque of Limoges enamel, attributed to Jean Pénicaut the second, bought for 775 francs, sold for 6500. Another, representing Apollo and the Muses, bought for 830, sold for 3500. Two plates in gresaille, by Pierre Raymond, cost 2150 and sold for 3150. A Palissy plate, with a figure of temperance in the centre and four cartouches representing the four elements separated by caryatids and scrolls, all enamelled in colors, had belonged to the collection of Prince Saltykoff, who had paid 5000 francs for it to a dealer named Malinet, who had bought it for 500 from an amateur in Nevers who had probably got it for nothing. It cost M. de Lafaulotte 10,000 francs in 1861, and, at his sale, it cost its purchaser, a M. Lowengard, 25,700. A hanging jewel in enamelled gold, enriched with pearls and precious stones, Italian workmanship of the sixteenth century, had cost, in 1859, 4000 francs, and brought 33,000. The prices of some of the Sévres are interesting. A jardinière in the form of a fan, of the period of Louis XV., decorated with figures and landscapes, was bought by Mme. La Baronne Salomon de Rothschild for 1580 francs. Two others of the same form, marked B. 1754, went for 5800 francs. A "cabaret solitaire," gros bleu, with birds, flowers and landscapes in reserves, marked F. 1758, and the painter's mark of "Moiron fils," went to M. Fournier for 2200. All the above are *pâte tendre*; of *pâte dure*, two vases, gros bleu, mounted in gilt bronze, brought 4000 francs. A number of tapestries went for moderate prices. A Gobelin, time of Louis XIV., subject from the story of Psyche, after Raphael, went to M. Levy for 2600 francs, and a large carpet of the Savonnerie factory brought 2150 francs.